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ABSTRACT

The Survival Skills Center described in this report operates at Columbia College, CA, to provide individualized instruction in basic reading, writing, and math skills using a series of modules which focus on problems commonly encountered in everyday life. After discussing the need for such instruction among nontraditional students, the paper describes five booklets written by Center staff: (1) "Your Health," which covers topics including first aid, safety, drug and alcohol abuse, and birth control; (2) "Your Community," which focuses on government and community services, the legal system, and public transportation; (3) "Your Money," which considers personal budgeting, banking, credit, taxes, and insurance; (4) "You as a Consumer," which concentrates on finding a place to live, buying a car, shopping, and energy needs; and (5) "Your Job," which centers around assessing personal interests and finding and keeping a job. The remainder of the paper discusses administrative and operational factors that are basic to the Center's success. These factors include: the familiarity of the staff with the abilities and problems of the students; the utilization of well-qualified instructional aides who are sensitive to students' social and emotional problems; the use of a variety of instructional materials; the selective and individualized employment of diagnostic tests; and the availability of nontransferable credit for completing courses at the Center. (JP)

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SURVIVAL SKILLS IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE.

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the
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James Kindle

SURVIVAL SKILLS IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The survival skills project at Columbia College was to develop a program of individualized instruction in the basic academic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics, and the use of these skills in exercises dealing with daily living. During the course of the project we developed five modules. Their subjects dealt with health and safety, the community, managing money, consumer problems and the job.

The problem is that although the existing programs serve most of the students reasonably well, there are increasing numbers of students who require more practical lessons applicable to their daily experiences. This kind of program is designed to help students with learning disabilities, re-entry students, CETA students, adults requiring literacy skills development, students with English as a second language, and the so-called traditional student on occasion.

I wrote the proposal for this project, which was approved by the state, and received funding for writing and printing our five survival modules. My instructional aides and I--with the use of one outside consultant--developed and wrote the five survival skills books. Another student illustrated them, and another did the typing. The college printed the books.

Our survival skills program consisted of the following five modules:

1. Your Health. This included the topics of first aid, safety, smoking and drinking, drug abuse, nutrition, pregnancy and birth control, finding and visiting a doctor, and exercise and life expectancy.

2. Your Community. This module looked at the various levels of government, from the local to the national. It covered community services,

from welfare and food stamps to transportation and drivers licenses. It discussed the laws and court system, and legal problems of the average citizen.

3. Your Money. Topics in this unit covered budget planning, banking, credit and finance charges, taxes and tax problems, and insurance.

4. You as a Consumer. This module dealt with the problems of finding a place to live, renting, buying a house, buying a car, reading newspaper ads, shopping (from groceries to door-to-door sales), consumer problems, and where to get help with them.

5. Your Job. This book handled assessment of personal interest and assets, looking for a job, how to interview for and get the job, and how to hold a job after getting it.

The books are written at about fifth grade reading level difficulty. They are composed of short reading passages, each followed by an activity. These activities involve reading comprehension questions, spelling, simple math, and English and writing exercises. The books are consumable, with space for the written activities right in each book. Answer keys are at the end of each book.

The more that my aides and I got into the writing of these books, the more we realized that survival skills were useful to all students--the "Gee, I didn't know that" phenomena.

Survival skills also had another meaning for us. With Proposition 13, our budget for supplies and materials was completely eliminated, so the only way we could provide a program for these kids that needed it was to do it ourselves, with a little financial help from the state. In order to stay in business, we had to have something for our students, and with no money to buy other programs, we had to make up our own. We're getting more skilled at this, as a matter of our own survival.

The stated philosophy of our college is probably similar to that of many other community colleges. It includes words like "dedicated to the worth and dignity of each student . . . responsibility to the student's needs, desires and aspirations . . . flexibility in meeting student needs." I want to point out that the philosophy of the college as a whole and its learning skills center are one and the same. This philosophy isn't just something that sounds inspiring on paper. In the skills center, we practice it with every student every day of the year. The survival skills program has added another dimension to our ability to do this.

To best utilize a survival skills program, you have to know the population you will be serving. Look at your students and determine their needs, their intellectual abilities, their ages, their previous schooling or lack of it, their physical and mental handicaps, if any, and other factors like these. What programs do you already offer to address these problems in your school? Do you correlate your reading, math, vocabulary and spelling with other programs such as business, health professions, or even diesel mechanics? The skills center is responsible for helping students to survive in these programs, and it can't do it without involving the other departments. This involvement also builds a better relationship between the skills center and the rest of the faculty. A good skills center should be able to support and supplement every other program in the school.

I am very fortunate at Columbia to have exceptional personnel in the instructional aides who work with me. My aides are intelligent, well-qualified, and probably more important than anything else, they are interested in people. And people are our stock in trade. A good skills

center needs personnel who are familiar with counseling techniques, because you are going to have to listen to more problems than you ever believed possible. We must realize that we are an educational institution, but sometimes before we can educate, we must help our students with social or emotional problems, or at least listen. Skills center must be familiar with and committed to individualized instruction, because no two students have exactly the same problem. And your personnel must be willing to work, because there is always a lot of that.

It would be impossible to run a good survival program without administrative support. Again, I am fortunate. The president of our college describes our skills center somewhat poetically as "the heartbeat of the college." If your president and other administrators do not put much value on your skills center, then I would suggest that you work awfully hard at convincing them that you are vital to the survival of the community college. They can't live up to their high-sounding philosophies without you and, of course, your skills center can't survive without their support.

Physical surroundings are important. Our skills center is as pleasant and relaxed as we can make it. We even supply coffee, which is free--and probably worth exactly that much. But students come in for it, and they come in for help. The ideal location is to be near the center of activity. You cannot be isolated. You have to be where the students are. We are located near the library, the business and admission offices, and right over the cafeteria. We see lots of students. Because the survival students vary so greatly in interest and ability, there must be space provided for individual tutoring and for small group instruction. We are currently lacking in both of these. My office is constantly being used for both.

Instruction, of course, must be open-entry open-exit, success oriented, providing for individual differences, flexible, with tutoring available, using all the various teaching techniques, be related to all the other disciplines, and relevant to the community and to the needs of the student. Naturally.

Your materials must be widely varied. You are a drug store, dispensing to each student according to his/her needs. Self made instructional materials have a valuable place in the skills program. Materials suggested by or developed with the help of other faculty members will also make your program more relevant, and will improve your relationship with the rest of the school. Again, it's a matter of mutual survival. To function well as a skills center, you need the support of the rest of the school, and they need you.

Testing is one problem that irritates me. I believe that testing is often overused and abused in the skills center. Most students do not need a battery of tests to tell them what their problem is, and many are not emotionally equipped to handle these tests. If I ask a student what 9 times 7 is, and he answers, "I don't know," I don't need a test to tell me that he can't multiply whole numbers. Or if he says he can't read, should I give him a reading test to prove it? There is a place for testing, of course, but we in the skills business need to individualize our appraisal and assessment techniques just as much as we do our methods of instruction.

How do we grade our students? Are grades necessary? These questions are often puzzled over. We give grades in our program, and the grade is based on the student's own progress, comparing where he/she started to where he/she is at the end of the program. Our classes do carry college

credit, which is figured in the student's grade point average, but is non-transferrable. It logically follows: if our programs have value and importance, they are worthy.

As with most of you, I feel proud to have been able to provide a second chance (or third, or fourth) for many students. This has varied from teaching a student to write his name and address, to speak English, write a job resume, understand the complexities of modern life just a little bit better, or succeed in another class, or to get his high school diploma equivalent, or to graduate with that important AA Degree. To paraphrase that famous inscription on the Statue of Liberty--"Give me your handicapped, your non-English speaking, your disadvantaged, your struggling masses, eager to achieve--and we will break our necks trying to help them."

College has changed considerably from the time many of us went there. Can you remember back to when only the upper ten percent of the high school graduating class, or only those with money and social position went to college? Neither can I, but it wasn't that long ago, and the change-over to "college has something for everyone" has largely been instituted by the community colleges. However, when the lower third of the high school class, or the senior citizen, or the non-high school graduate entered college, new techniques and new programs in teaching and counseling had to be developed to help these people. The learning skills center evolved and became the survival center for many of these students, and the vehicle by which to help many more who would have dropped out or barely gotten by in previous times. Every student is unique. Every student is valuable. Every student has potential, and it is our responsibility as skills center instructors to help develop this potential.

SURVIVAL SKILLS

The purpose of this project was to develop a program of individualized instruction in the survival skills at Columbia College. These skills will include the basic academic skills of reading, writing and mathematics, and the use of these skills in daily living.

The problem is that although the existing program serves most of the students well, there is an increasing number of students who require more practical lessons applicable to daily experience.

This type of program will serve students with learning disabilities, reentry students, CETA program, adults requiring literacy skills development, regular students that require these independent living skills and students with English as a Second Language, such as the Cambodians and Vietnamese.

A list of everyday activities required of any independent adult has been developed and aggregated into five units dealing with topics such as health, community, money, consumer affairs and employment. Subjects covered under the various areas are:

1. Health - safety, first aid, smoking and drinking, drug abuse, seeing a doctor, pregnancy and birth control, and life expectancy.

2. Community - levels of government, community services, laws and courts, and transportation.

3. Your Money - will include budget planning, banking, credit, taxes and insurance.

4. You As a Consumer - finding a place to live, buying a car, shopping, the smart consumer and emergency needs.

5. Your Job - your interests and assets, finding job openings, how to get a job and after you get the job.

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